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An evaluation of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme - development, challenges and progress in the first two years of an international network

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Abstract:

The Sister Libraries programme is an initiative of the IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults section. Launched in 2009, it enables children's librarians in any country to find a sister library somewhere else in the world and build a collaborative partnership based on the exchange of views and the development of joint programmes. This paper describes the development and progress of the first two years of this international network and reports on the evaluation of the programme using the concept of a 'community of practice'. In evaluating the Sister Libraries programme a longitudinal view is taken of capacity building and professional generosity as a 'community of practice' develops.

Introduction

Library practitioners are at the forefront of promoting children's and young adult's rights (Koren, 2011) and they are a vital aid to literacy development. Librarians have a tradition of networking and developing 'communities of practice'. Partnering between libraries from different countries is undertaken as an opportunity to share professional knowledge. Research shows that libraries 'are steeped in the ethos of mutuality, they appreciate partnership; their purpose is flexible enough to allow them to support others while keeping sight of their own aims' (Matarasso, 1998, iii). These shared values and purposes form the common ground for effective partnerships between library practitioners. This paper describes the progress of the first two years of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme as it develops as an international network. The evaluation of the programme uses the concept of the 'community of practice' and takes a longitudinal view of capacity building and professional generosity as the 'community of practice' develops.

Partnership opportunities - library twinning and UNESCO guidelines

The concept of library twinning provides a wider background for the IFLA Sister Libraries programme. The UNESCO Guidelines define twinning as '*the ongoing relationship between two libraries in different countries for the purposes of improving the practice of librarianship across national boundaries*' (Doyle and Scarry, 1994, 3). Twinning support is also seen as a primary principle of UNESCO because it has a direct impact on the education and literacy of each society and also has influence on cultural, social and economic life.

There are different models for how the twinning libraries may relate to each other. The UNESCO guidelines suggest the relationship should have mutual but not necessarily equal benefits to both libraries. Where there is a formal agreement the library twinning will be arranged at the organisation or institution level. In this situation there may be a signed agreement or a Memorandum of Understanding, sometimes linked to an agreed set of objectives between the partners. In a more informal arrangement library twinning can take place at an individual level, offering a more flexible approach. Each level of agreement has both positive and negative aspects.

Sister Libraries

Sister Libraries is an umbrella term for a formal or informal relationship between libraries in different countries to build community ties between the organizations and to meet local needs. There are a number of examples of Sister Library projects internationally. In America the former ALA President Sarah Long initiated Sister Libraries in 1999 as an initiative of her American Library Association Presidency saying '*For those of us who care about libraries, we can no longer be content to confine our activities to our national borders*' (Long, 2001, 79). This continues as a project of the American Library Association's International Relations Round Table. To quote a more recent view from Nancy Bolt '*Libraries from around the world have benefited from Sister Library Partnerships. They bring information, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and global understanding*' (Bolt, 2011). The IFLA Sister Libraries programme discussed in this paper was established in 2009 and promotes the pairing of librarians who work in support of children and young adults.

The role of library practitioners

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has a very proactive Children and Young Adults' section which emphasizes that effective and professionally run children's libraries require trained, flexible and committed staff. Library practitioners have collaborated at an international level to provide guidance to help public libraries implement high quality children's services. It is recognised that the demands of the information age have re-shaped librarianship and the use of technologies to acknowledge and enhance the economic, cultural and communication revolution in today's world. The Guidelines for Children's Library Services published by the IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section provide an implementation tool for libraries of all sizes and economic levels. The goals for children's library services are

- To facilitate the right of every child to information; functional, visual, digital and media literacy; cultural development; reader development; lifelong learning; creative programs in leisure time
- To provide children with open access to all resources and media
- To provide various activities for children, parents and caregivers
- To facilitate families' entry into the community
- To empower children and to advocate for their freedom and safety
- To encourage children to become confident and competent people
- To strive for a peaceful world. (IFLA, 2003, 9)

Evidence has shown that library practitioners have a key role to play in supporting the development of language and literacy in young children and the reading needs of young adults. The results from successful library programmes and projects shows creativity, flexibility and professional generosity. Children's librarians present themselves as well-rounded professionals who have a good knowledge of their client groups, understand theories of children's learning and development and recognize and support the needs of their diverse communities (Rankin, 2011).

The IFLA Sister Libraries programme - developmental timeline.

This partnership programme embodies the spirit of IFLA and links to key IFLA initiatives. The idea for the Sister Libraries initiative was suggested at the IFLA meeting in Milan in 2009 and since November 2009 six Standing Committee members have volunteered as Godmother Mentors to support the twinning libraries. The idea was born as a response to challenges faced by many children's librarians all over the world - insufficient training, professional isolation, inadequate book collections, and lack of information on good books, lack of moral support. This is in places where the role of libraries is particularly important, where families do not buy children's books because they are not aware of the importance of children's reading or cannot afford to buy books, and politicians do not see children's reading as a priority (Quinones, 2010, 2). The project launched on the IFLA website in November 2009 with information published in English, Spanish, French and Arabic. A multilingual blog was added to the website in June 2010, <http://sisterlibraries.wordpress.com> for Sister Libraries to share their experience.

Guidance on how to find a Sister Library partner is provided on the website and the process is simple:

How can I find a sister library?

1. Register: fill in the Registration Form and send it to our Information Coordinator, Ian Yap: ian_yap@nlb.gov.sg
 2. Find libraries that interest you in the List of participating libraries and make connections with them via e-mail
 3. Once the partnership is decided, inform Ian (The List of participating libraries will then indicate that the libraries have been "paired")
- Note: The agreement between libraries can be informal, or formalized in written form.

Quinones (2010) has reported on the reasons recorded by the early registrations for wanting to take part in the Sister Libraries programme and find a partner. The key words she identified were:

- to share - *experiences, ideas, information, discussions... so as to provide a better service, to attract the young public, to improve their reading culture, to make the library more alive.*
- to learn - *know about other ways of being a librarian, learn from Sister Libraries that are in advanced stages of development; grow in accordance with the library development all over the world, enrich one's work.*
- to cooperate - *fostering different and creative points of view; to build and belong to a network, to establish contact with people with the same goals, to meet new friends and colleagues.*

Another key reason is the wish to interact with other cultures and an interest in cultural diversity. Here are the words of a Sister Libraries participant from Finland:

'This has been great! This is an easy way to get contact with libraries and librarians around the world. I think I wouldn't have had any contacts without this programme.'

The particular strengths of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme are

- easy entry level for the individual librarian,
- a cost neutral involvement as there are no fees or subscriptions and
- mentoring support from a 'friendly' expert in the community of practice.

Sister Libraries registrations at the time of writing this paper (August 2012) shows there are 131 registered libraries and 39 IFLA Sister Libraries pairs are now underway. This is a success factor to be celebrated!

At the heart of the IFLA Sister Library partnership is the opportunity to develop peer to peer connections and provide informal learning – thus supporting professional development and the opportunity to enhance library services for children and young adults. This evaluation is about *international* partnerships where support is offered between professionals who come from different countries and different cultures – the common element is the provision of library services focussing on children and young adults.

Ian Yap, the Information Co-ordinator, has worked conscientiously with other Standing Committee members to establish the registration system for those wishing to participate in the programme and he is to be commended for all his hard work on this. Dealing with registration forms can perhaps seem an onerous and not very exciting task but it is the crucial starting point for the process of developing the record of this international network. Already there is an obvious success story to report about the process recording the number of registrations, which countries are represented, how many languages are spoken. However this international programme is still at a very early stage of development. A very positive start has been made by the co-ordinator Ian Yap and the six Godmother Mentors - volunteering their professional expertise as a great example of professional generosity.

The theoretical framework for this evaluation research project – the ‘community of practice’

This paper has already indicated that there is considerable activity around library partnerships and identified literature on the benefits and challenges. The UNESCO handbook on library twinning by Doyle and Scarry (1994; Doyle, 1994) provides sample goals for twinning programs and suggests a process to set up an agreement. There are also publicity-type articles describing programmes and projects (for example Long, 2001 discussing the Sister Library program in America) and encouraging participation.

However, the desk research has revealed that most of the published accounts of these partnerships is primarily descriptive and anecdotal and does not critique how they function. This has also been noted by Banner (2008). This paper seeks to address this gap by providing empirical, theoretically grounded research on the IFLA Sister Libraries programme; it attempts to take a deeper look at peer to peer support and informal learning by using Wenger’s ‘Community of Practice’ as the theoretical framework. According to Wenger, Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2006).

Sister libraries as a ‘Community of Practice’

Some connections are inevitable given enough time and networking, some people are bound to meet and find that they share a passion, so says Etienne Wenger the educational theorist and practitioner, writing about the development of communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). However sometimes a helping hand is needed and this is where a programme such as the Sister Libraries can help to facilitate and foster such connections where practitioners are seeking peer-to-peer connections and learning opportunities with or without the support of institutions. According to Wenger (2006) a community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest where members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. Members of a community of practice are practitioners who build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. Communities of practice are everywhere and are such a familiar experience that it often escapes our attention. Yet when given a name and brought into focus, this provides a perspective that can help us understand our world better (Wenger, 2006).

Why the focus on Communities of Practice?

Being part of the community of practice offers important short term value to the members who engage. This may mean gaining help with challenges, providing access to expertise, giving and gaining confidence, and potentially having fun with colleagues. There is the potential for meaningful work. There are also long term value to members who are part of the community involving personal development, reputation and professional identity. Wenger (2006) suggests there are also considerable benefits to the organisation that the individual member belongs to. These factors resonate with the objectives of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme in terms of supporting the development of the individual librarian and enhancing the work in their library environment. Wenger et al. (2002) use the analogy of cultivation where a plant does its own growing whether carefully planted or blown into place by the wind. However, you can do much to encourage a healthy plant – till the soil, ensure enough nutrients are provided, supply water, protect from pests and weeds. Perhaps this is how we might perceive the impetus of the Sister Libraries programme with the intervention of the Godmother Mentors helping to promote the growth of the practitioner network.

Evaluation as a form of research.

Having introduced the theoretical framework this next section will discuss evaluation as a form of research used to assess the value or effectiveness of social interventions or programmes (Seale, 2012, 567). This evaluation project is using qualitative research methods. Qualitative research aims at grasping the subjective meaning of issues from the perspectives of the participants and the analysis of the data is interpretative. The aim is to discover new aspects of the situation under study (Flick 2011, 12). In providing an overview of evaluation research, Powell (2006) says that it should enhance knowledge and decision making and lead to practical applications. It is intended that the findings will provide further insight into this programme.

It could be argued that it is much too early to attempt to evaluate the impact of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme – some of the pairings have only just started, others librarians are poised ready to make that all important contact with someone elsewhere in the world who shares an interest in libraries for children and young people. The evaluation approach is often used to judge systems and services as noted by Markless and Streatfield (2006), however that is not the approach taken in this evaluation project which is taking a longitudinal view as a ‘community of practice’ develops. The currency is not financial - the currency is goodwill and professional generosity! In evaluating the Sister Libraries programme the researcher is taking a longitudinal view of capacity building and professional generosity as a ‘community of practice’ develops. This isn’t a quick ‘tick box’ of outcomes achieved. With so many variables the story of the IFLA Sister Libraries international partnerships will take some time to unfold and the intention is to examine changes and developments over time.

Methodology – data generation strategy.

A variety of research methods were used to gather the data for this paper (Teddle, Tashakkori, 2009). To understand the context of library twinning the researcher undertook a preliminary review of the literature using desk research. The qualitative data was gathered in three phases:

- telephone interviews with the six Godmother Mentors in July 2011 using a semi structured interview schedule
- questionnaires sent by email to six godmother mentors in July 2012.

- questionnaires sent by email to 48 registered English speaking Sister Libraries participants in July 2012.

Gathering views and experiences of the Godmother Mentors.

Qualitative interviewing is a particularly suitable method for assessing complex issues such as values and understanding as it allows interviewees to speak in their own voices and with their own language. Qualitative interviews offer access to attitudes, values and feelings and allow respondents to answer 'in their own words' (Byrne 2012, 211). The researcher used an interview guide approach where the questions posed were seeking to obtain opinions, attitudes and experiences and the respondents were free to express themselves. The Godmother Mentors are located in France, England, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Sweden and due to this geographic distribution telephone interviews undertaken in July 2011 were the most efficient means of gathering data. The telephone interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewees and then transcribed for analysis.

The Godmother Mentors were contacted again one year later in July 2012 and invited to provide comments about their experiences with the Sister Libraries programme. The Godmother Mentor role is critical in making and fostering connections. Here are the views from two of these volunteers:

I think IFLA must be there for all librarians, to support them in their daily work. So few of us can attend conferences, many don't have access to training, don't read conference papers. I believe IFLA can be very concretely useful to any librarian through this project.

The project connects librarians across the world, so they can share experiences and library-developing ideas. Children across the world can communicate (the most important thing). In a wider perspective we give children a chance to learn about other cultures and ways of living – and it may help us to a better world.

Gathering views and experiences of the IFLA Sister Libraries participants.

Email questionnaires were sent by email in July 2012 to 48 English speaking registered Sister Libraries participants. The librarians were invited to write a short message saying what they thought was good about the Sister Libraries and what motivated them to volunteer to take part in the programme.

The researcher is not a linguist so the qualitative data collected and analysis so far has only related to the English speaking part of the Sister Libraries community. It is recognised that this is a limitation of the evaluation research to date as the English speaking constituent may not be a representative sample of those registered with the programme. Responses to the email questions were received from 20 Sister Libraries participants. A number of the email messages were undelivered due to computer system problems and this is an issue for the Standing Committee in terms of maintaining contacts. The responses below gives an indication of those with positive experiences so far:

“The project makes people from different parts of the world closer to each other and I personally find it very important” Xenia, Russian Federation

I have been able to see, how library work (especially among children) is made in a different land and culture. I have had many new ideas and we have made two program changes together - an art exhibition and a presentation of own country, culture and literature. We will continue! Reijo, Finland

The Sister Libraries programme is positive because it allows libraries to learn, develop and move forward by sharing experiences, successful programs and knowledge. Suzanne, Australia

Using anecdotal evidence to tell the story of value

Qualitative evidence can be very powerful particularly when practitioners have the opportunity to have their voices heard. Stories can be considered a good way to explain the linkages between community activities, knowledge resources, and performance outcomes. This of course depends on the involvement of practitioners because only they can tell how the knowledge was put into action and how it added value to the community. It is worth noting the view that ‘*Communities cannot be measured and managed in conventional ways. Traditional methods are not likely to appreciate the creativity, sharing and self-initiative that are the core elements of how a community creates value*’. (Wenger et al. 2002, 185). Herein lies the importance of listening to (and acknowledging) the voice of the Godmother Mentors and the voice of the Sister Libraries participants.

Challenges identified and opportunities for the future development

Communication

Establishing and maintaining communication was identified as a challenge. It seems ironic that this is an issue in our 21st century world, but the digital divide is a problem that the Sister Libraries godmothers have identified. The pressure of time is often cited as the reason for lack of communication. As with most relationships it can take time to build up trust and a partnership may build slowly. There may be some doubt that one of the partners is truly interested in the partnership. This is why ongoing communication is so important. The Godmother Mentors also want to encourage the participating sister libraries to send them regular feedback on how the partnership is working and the Standing Committee on Children and Young Adults is currently investigating the use of social media as a pilot project.

Managing expectations

It has to be recognised that time is needed to administer and arrange the Sister Libraries pairings as this work is being undertaken in a voluntary capacity by the Standing Committee members. Some pairings between librarians begin to work within a short time scale and others take longer to establish. For a variety of reasons some pairings will not work from the outset or may flounder despite the support from the Godmother Mentors; in these cases a strategy is needed to support the disappointed party.

A positive future for IFLA Sister Libraries – but the community must help

The IFLA Sister Libraries programme is still in a very early stage of development but the indications for future growth are positive. However, there is the critical question of sustainability in growing the international network. More Godmother Mentor volunteers are needed as at the time of writing this evaluation there are only six to cover the entire globe. More Sister Libraries can be encouraged to join the network

and there is a need to promote awareness of the programme with other sections of IFLA, particularly linking to the Building Stronger Library Associations strategy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the IFLA Sister Libraries programme is showing progress in developing as an international network. People matter most in helping to create value; we can have great systems and administrative processes in place but we still need people to make things work. This evaluation paper has described the progress of the first two years of the IFLA Sister Libraries programme using the concept of the 'community of practice'. It is intended that this longitudinal view of capacity building and professional generosity will be continued as the 'community of practice' develops. These are still early days, but through hard work, dedication and a real willingness to foster the spirit of IFLA, Sister Libraries are already adding value to their community.

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